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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the design and implementation of an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) task-based module consistent with Skehan's information processing model of second language acquisition (1998) and with the framework for task design elaborated by Willis (1996), using the Internet as a primary source of language input. In settings where contact with native speakers is infrequent, and where English-language textbooks and materials are in short supply or are very costly, the Internet can provide a needed source of language input. However, learners of a foreign language need more than just exposure to input. They also need to be able to interact purposefully, and to be able to focus on both form and meaning, in order to drive forward their interlanguage development. The use of the Internet, therefore, must be accompanied by the kinds of tasks that will force learners into meaningful verbal interactions and at the same time invite reflection. It was with these considerations in mind that the author designed the module described in this paper. These are the considerations that guided the design of this module: advanced level language proficiency; legacy of focus on grammatical form; availability of Internet access; desire to learn more about English-speaking university students; and curiosity and concern about a proposed American Studies program. (AEF)

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Task-Based Instruction Using the Internet

By: Nancy Rennau Tumposky

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Task-Based Instruction Using the Internet

Nancy Rennau Tumposky

Introduction

This article describes the design and implementation of an EFL task-based module consistent with Skehan's information processing model of second language acquisition (1998) and with the framework for task design elaborated by Willis (1996), using the Internet as a primary source of language input. In settings where contact with native speakers is infrequent, and where English-language textbooks and materials are in short supply or are very costly, the Internet can provide a needed source of language input. However, learners of a foreign language need more than just exposure to input. They also need to be able to interact purposefully, and to be able to focus on both form and meaning, in order to drive forward their interlanguage development. The use of the Internet, therefore, must be accompanied by the kinds of tasks which will force learners into meaningful verbal interactions and at the same time invite reflection. It was with these considerations in mind that I designed the module described below.

Setting and Rationale

The setting was a "Language in Use" class of second-year students of English at Comenius University, Bratislava, Slovakia, and the goal of the class had been defined very broadly as "general language skills development." The learners were

at an upper intermediate/advanced level of proficiency, and most of them had a legacy of learning experiences from secondary school which had focused on the analysis of grammatical form. All the students had access to the Internet, but not to a wide variety of printed materials in English. Many of them had traveled to English-speaking countries, either for short-term employment or on holiday, and all of them were eager to learn more about the lifestyles and cultures of English-speaking university students. At the time when the course was taking place, Comenius University had just proposed the creation of a program in American Studies, which was generating a lot of interest and discussion. These are the considerations, then, which guided the design of this module:

a. advanced level language proficiency
b. legacy of focus on grammatical form
c. availability of Internet access
d. desire to learn more about English-speaking university students
e. curiosity and concern about a proposed American Studies program.

The task-based design of this module was also congruent with several goals of my own, namely: (1) the development of learner-centered pedagogies which emphasize autonomy and independent thinking; (2) the use of the Internet to compensate for inequities of access to knowledge among students from different social settings; and (3) the creation of

opportunities for American students to be exposed to perspectives from other parts of the world.

The task I designed for my Slovak students was to collectively write a short paper ("Final Report") of recommendations about the proposed American Studies program. The audiences for the report were: the Chair of the English Department, the Progam Officer at the U.S. Embassy in Bratislava, the Director of the Fulbright Commission in Bratislava, and the Director of the Global Education Program at Montclair State University (USA), all of whom were expected be involved in some of the planning decisions about the new program. My choice of task was influenced by Skehan's statement (1998:22) that "solving problems is what puts pressure on the communicative system to change." The idea of making recommendations to their "superiors" was perceived by these university students as being sufficiently problematic so as to motivate them at what I hoped would be an optimal level. Furthermore, a convergent task such as this, which requires the participants to reach consensus (Fotos & Eillis 1991), requires considerable negotiation and interaction, and such problem-based interaction would lead, according to Skehan, to interlanguage growth. The Final Report was to be based on (1) the students' own ideas, generated through class discussion, (2) information gleaned from the Web about other overseas American Studies programs, and about potential sources of funding, and (3) suggestions from American university students with whom they would correspond as short-term pen pals. I was able to set up the pen pals by contacting undergraduates at my home institution, Montclair State University, and at several other American universities.

Implementation

The opening classes of "Language in Use" focused on our getting to know each other – my getting to know them (their level of language proficiency, interests and concerns) and their getting to know me (my American accent, my teaching style). At the third class session, I gave out the assignments, and a timeline to be followed. At that time, they also chose pen pals from a list of names I provided. The tasks consisted of oral summaries in class of Web searches and pen-pal correspondence, discussions in class about the form and content of the final paper, two written reflections, and the collective Final Report. The reflections were to be submitted at intervals during the course, each student assessing his or her own contributions to the class discussions up to that point, and to the emerging collective paper. In the reflections, students were also asked to comment on language issues that arose during the Internet searches or as part of the pen-pal correspondence. The purpose of the reflections was to engineer the kind of "stock taking" which can enhance self awareness and growth, and also to help reduce student anxiety about the "enormity" of the final product while still insuring some accountability. I hoped that the students would engage in what Ur (1996) calls "enriched reflection", integrating personal experience and external input in a way that supports critical thinking.

Outcomes

There were multiple outcomes. Some of the tasks were seen as very unusual from the students' point of view, especially the reflections, which required the submission of written work during the course itself, rather than just at the end, and asked for personal opinions as well! My assurances that there was "no one right answer" was intended to put the students at ease, but initially seemed to have the opposite effect. Eyebrows were raised, glances exchanged. After reading the first reflections, I responded (individually) in a tone that was more conversational than judgmental, and this type of response had a "loosening up" effect, such that the second reflections were more substantive, less cautious..

. The other written outcome was the Final Report itself, which turned out to be an impressive and professional-looking document. The discussions in class which generated the ideas for the final report were, of course, an important process component of the overall design, as was the writing itself. I experimented with several techniques in both these areas. During the class discussions, I made an effort to guide rather than lead, and took it upon myself to rotate among the students certain roles, such as recording secretary, summarizer, and copy editor, so that the stronger personalities in the class could be held in check, and so that everyone would be encouraged to contribute. Anticipating the difficulties of composing in a formal register, I created some practice activities around patterns such as "We recommend that such-and-such happen", "We suggest + gerund" and "We think it advisable that …" and elicited sentences in these patterns, anonymously, from the students during class time. I then typed up all the responses and used this master list in the next class as a jumping off point. When it came time to begin the actual writing, I again elicited anonymous language samples, this time

of "opening sentences". Again, we discussed them all without knowing who had written what, and, with the help of a laptop computer in class, created a rough draft, which could later be put on disk and sent out on e-mail. In this way, we used what technology we had at hand to involve the whole class as much as possible.

Conclusions

The essential components of this module were the task itself (The Final Report), which was meaning-centered, and the written cycles of reflection, which permitted the occasional focus on language form. The tension between focus on meaning and focus on form is a central issue in task-based syllabus design (Skehan 1998, Willis 1996) and one without easy resolution. Especially at an advanced proficiency level, it is difficult to design tasks which address both these aspects of interlanguage development while still maintaining motivation for the learners. In this study, the use of the Internet as a source of language input allowed questions of form to arise naturally as part of the research process, rather than being preset by the instructor. The students themselves were the ones who identified most problematic areas of usage, and had a genuine concern for accuracy, given the nature of the task. I concluded that the Internet can be a valuable source of language input for learners in foreign language settings with limited access to other authentic materials, but that input provided in this way should be counter-balanced by other task requirements (such as written reflections) which help students to be critical of what they are reading..

Keywords:

Internet

Slovakia

Syllabus Design

Task Based

References:

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